NEWS

Winchester School Committee rejects FinCom bylaw proposals; Select Board expresses concerns

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER

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Both the Winchester School Committee and Select Board have expressed concern regarding new bylaw proposals by the Finance Committee, citing hasty implementation and possible overreach. FILE PHOTO

Winchester's School Committee recently voted unanimously agai
proposed bylaw changes from the Finance Committee that would

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ultimately require Town Meeting approval, citing concerns over hasty implementation and potential overreach into school operations.

Select Board members expressed similar reservations without taking formal action in a special March 4 meeting.

The proposals, which focus on financial transparency, warrant article requirements and committee oversight, were presented to town boards in late February with what officials called little time for review before the March 14 warrant closing date for Spring Town Meeting.

“I don’t think this is the way it should have been handled,” Select Board member Bill McGonigle said during the board’s March 4 meeting. “If I’m required to take a position on these proposed edits anytime in the near future, it would be simply for unfavorable action.”

The proposals, signed by Finance Committee Chair Jeffrey Calabrese on Jan. 20, would require the School Committee to distribute financial allocation models to multiple town entities by Oct. 1 annually.

To the Winchester News, Calabrese pointed out the Committee on Government Regulations — an eight-member standing committee appointed by the town moderator responsible for reviewing the town’s bylaws and recommending revisions — expressed that committees and boards were welcome to suggest changes and ideas as part of their review process.

“The Finance Committee provided mere ideas to facilitate discussion at the COGR as part of their holistic review process and subsequent recommendations,” Calabrese told the News.

On Nov. 26, the Finance Committee was invited by the co-chairs of the COGR to participate in a future meeting and discuss any such ideas.

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Calabrese said that invitation included the following language:

“Please confer with your colleagues and bring any ideas that you have, individually or collectively.”

Like the Select Board, the School Committee members expressed similar frustrations during their Feb. 27 meeting, formally voting to recommend unfavorable action on proposals they said would undermine the committee's statutory authority.

The Finance Committee’s recommendations, dated Jan. 20 and signed by Calabrese, aim to standardize financial reporting requirements across town departments, including new mandates for the School Committee to share allocation models and end-of-year reports with multiple town entities.

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Winchester Superintendent Dr. Frank Hackett pushed back against these proposals, noting they contained factual errors and redundancies.

“We already provided [this information] through the controller, and it’s just part of our every single year process,” Hackett told the School Committee. “This just feels like a requirement and a step that is not necessary.”

The proposals would amend Chapter 3 of the town bylaws, adding a new section that requires the School Committee to distribute financial models showing how town costs are allocated within school budgets to the Select Board, town manager, Finance Committee and all town meeting members by Oct. 1 each year.

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School Committee member Chris Nixon questioned the practicality of such extensive distribution requirements.

“If we’re going to go through these edits one by one, either today or Monday or even at Town Meeting — if I was doing it alone — it would be hours and hours of discussion,” he said.

Another controversial Finance Committee proposal would extend the timeline for warrant article submissions, requiring main motions and supporting reports to be delivered to Town Meeting members 21 days before meetings instead of the current seven-day requirement.

Select Board member Anthea Brady, who attended a Finance Committee meeting about a month earlier, expressed surprise at the scope of the recommendations.

“We brought some very minor changes. They shared with us some questions that were really felt like clarifying questions,” Brady said. “This is a very different scope than what we had seen when we joined their meeting.”

The proposals also aim to modify Town Meeting structures, specifying that Spring Town Meeting should focus on matters with fiscal effects including “capital, capital stabilization, building stabilization and community preservation,” while Fall Town Meeting should primarily address non-fiscal matters.

School Committee member Tom Hopcroft called the proposals burdensome and potentially harmful to the committee’s independence.

“It’s not prudent for us to limit the flexibility and the authority of the School Committee,” Hopcroft said. “Our responsibilities are pret

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out, and I don't see any reason why this would be in the interest of the School Committee, the School Department, or even the town."

The Finance Committee's recommendations also seek to modify the Educational Facilities Planning and Building Committee, removing "planning" from its name and limiting its scope to complete renovations or replacements of educational facilities rather than smaller maintenance projects.

Hackett explained to the School Committee that Massachusetts state law and Winchester's town charter already establish clear boundaries for the committee's authority that the proposed changes appeared to encroach upon.

"You are essentially your own financial entity. You make decisions as a committee," Hackett said, noting the School Committee negotiates collective bargaining agreements directly without review by the town personnel board.

School Committee Chair Karen Maruyama Bolognese agreed the process lacked collaboration.

"These discussions should not be behind closed doors. People who are being affected need to be informed, and they need to be part of the process," she said.

All of this comes as Winchester's Committee on Government Regulations is currently conducting its decennial review of town regulations.

The Capital Planning Committee also voted unanimously against the Finance Committee's proposals during its Feb. 28 meeting, with Nixon reporting that even the Finance Committee representatives pres supported that unfavorable recommendation.

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Proponents of the changes argue they would strengthen financial oversight and accountability. The Finance Committee memo states the proposals aim to "standardize and require financial analysis plus sources and uses of funds for each warrant article with sufficient time for the Finance Committee to properly evaluate and opine on warrant articles."

Bolognese will represent the School Committee's unfavorable recommendation at the Government Regulations Committee's planned March 5 meeting.

"I will make myself available and take copious notes," Bolognese said when asked if she could attend the Government Regulations Committee meeting.

Town officials must finalize warrant articles by March 14 for inclusion in Spring Town Meeting, scheduled to begin April 28.

Some officials have expressed concern that placeholder articles might be used to introduce amendments on the Town Meeting floor without adequate review.

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‘Chicago: Teen Edition’ dances onto the Winchester High School stage

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The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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